

Sermon for the 16th Sunday after Pentecost
Trinity Church, August 31, 2008
Matthew 18:15-21

Jesus told his disciples that "... where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." By saying that, he put the seal of authenticity on Christian worship and he described the quality of Christian fellowship. But Jesus was also entirely aware that, men and women being what they are, where two or three are gathered together there is likely to be disagreement and contention. Someone once said that if two Scotsmen were marooned on a desert island they would start a First and Second Presbyterian church! And that seems to have been typical of the whole church throughout its history. Only the particular issues change from generation to generation, and each one has, at the time seemed to be the defining issue for all eternity.

It is in connection with the very real possibility of conflict in the church that Jesus announced the absolute certainty of his presence on the scene. I'm going to borrow some language here. It's from *The Message*, a new translation of the Bible that often captures the words of scripture in startling new ways, and it puts the Gospel lesson in terms that make sense in today's circumstances: Here is how it reads:

If a fellow believer hurts you, go and tell him -- work it out between the two of you. If he listens, you have made a friend. If he won't listen, take one or two others along, so that the presence of witnesses will keep things honest, and try again. If he still won't listen, tell the church. If he won't listen to the church, you'll have to start over from scratch, confront him with the need for repentance, and offer again God's forgiving love.

Take this most seriously: a yes on earth is yes in heaven; a no on earth is no in heaven. What you say to one another is eternal. I mean this. When two of you get together on anything at all on earth and make a prayer of it, my Father in heaven goes into action. And when two or three of you are together because of me, you can be sure that I am there.

This is good practical advice and not particularly original with Jesus. The model is in the book of Deuteronomy (19:15), so Jesus was applying what was accepted Jewish practice. The difference is that Deuteronomy puts it in the form of a legal procedure. Jesus makes it a process of reconciliation. In the end, it is the presence of Christ that creates the reconciling condition.

"You can be sure that I am there." What a powerful difference that makes in all of the ways we relate to one another and the manner in which we craft our plans and reach the conclusions that affect our life together. That goes for Trinity Church and for every church. It goes for every denominational governing body and for every conference and contact among Christians world-wide. It calls for people to listen to each other, to listen with every effort to understand the speaker's heart, because Christ is in on the conversation.

Do any of you remember the retreat discussion that Father Doyle and Mary led, now a year and a half ago? We lit a candle and set it in the middle of the table to represent visibly the presence of Christ as a participant in our deliberations. June tells me that the Women's Guild does the same thing at each meeting and for the same reason. That pure and mysterious conversion of wax and wick into light speaks the incarnation of God in Christ. "Where two or three are together because of me, you can be sure that I am there." Light a candle, actual or imaginary.

The candle is infinitely portable. Jesus says, "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name,

wherever they are gathered or for whatever purpose, wherever the conversations gravitate, I'm still in on the argument. No doors are closed, no corridors isolated, no anonymity in the coffee-shop crowd. Technology and necessity have brought us the telephone conference call. I've never been quite comfortable with opening a conference-call committee meeting with prayer, but it's certainly consistent with the idea that two or three can be "gathered together" by telephone, as well as in the same room; and that Jesus can be present in cyberspace, with the same reconciling effect.

Sermons have a way of taking on a life of their own and lead the preacher in surprising directions. In my preparation, as I was mulling over that imagery, it struck me that even though Jesus spoke of two or three gathered, he would certainly not abandon the solitary believer alone with his thoughts. That, too, is a conversation; and the sense of the presence of Christ in the solitude makes a powerful difference in the direction and quality of the thought. It was worth setting a candle on my desk, praying that it give not only light, but enlightenment, and driving back into the shadows any ugly temptation to criticize.

I was caught in that trap once when I was the student pastor of a little church on the blue-collar fringe of Swarthmore, Pennsylvania. The church was a bastion of pre-millennial fundamentalism which was entirely opposite to what I was learning and thinking at Princeton Seminary. I found myself hurling arguments at the congregation, and sensing their hostility in response. Then, at Thanksgiving a fellow student asked me to preach to his congregation. It was a rural church somewhere in the piney woods of southern New Jersey. As I stepped into the pulpit, I saw only warm and welcoming faces, only open and expectant for what I was going to say. I was almost speechless, because inwardly at least I had armed myself again for battle; and I realized that what I had seen as the Swarthmore congregation's hostility was at least in part a reflection of my own. I stayed at Swarthmore for another two years, and when I went back for a visit twenty-five years later, we greeted each other with a mutual affection.

In our arguments, we are not called to surrender our deep convictions -- only to examine them as openly and honestly as our bent minds are able. We all view the world through astigmatic glasses of our own tint. St. Paul says, "As now we see through a clouded mirror ..." so we need to factor into the equation our own skewed viewpoint. And as Richard Hooker says in his quaint 17th Century way, "Deem it not impossible for you to err."

I am an un-reconstructed optimist. I don't subscribe to the half-full/half-empty metaphor. My cup runneth over. Contentious as we may be as a church, the light of the Gospel still shines. Whether Episcopal, Presbyterian or otherwise, we are no more divided than the fractious congregations of Corinthians, Romans, Ephesians and Galatians that St. Paul had to continuously counsel and chide. I consider the struggles of the present time to be a good sign. It is a sign that for many the church is important. Basic values and perceptions of truth and morality are involved. It is a sign that the Spirit is moving in the church and the world. It may look ugly from the outside and feel awful on the inside, but that is simply the cost of Christian discipleship. No one ever said that Christianity in any of its forms would be a comfortable religion. Comforting, yes; but not comfortable.

Monica Furlong, Anglican writer and no favorite of the Archbishop of Canterbury, not long before she died in 2002, wrote:

"I cannot imagine a more enjoyable time to be alive, except possibly the first few centuries of the Church. For while the great holocaust is sweeping away much that is beautiful, and all that is safe and comfortable and unquestioned, it is relieving us of mounds of Christian bric-a-brac as well. Stripped of our nonsense, we may be almost like the early Christians, painting their primitive

symbols on the walls of the catacombs: the Fish, the Loaves of Bread, the Cross, the monogram of Christ -- confident that in having done so they had described the necessities of life.”

Jesus kindly advice was, Talk to your adversary in the spirit of Christ. Listen in the same spirit; and in the end be ever aware that the living Christ, incarnate God, is a partner to the conversation. In that spirit my faith tells me that there are more and greater things to come. It was to a troubled church in Ephesus that Paul wrote his great prophetic and supremely optimistic ascription: “Now to him who, by the power that is at work within us, is able to accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or examine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen